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# To thine own context be true, but be careful: A Review of H. L. Goodall, Jr.'s Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life

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## To thine own context be true, but be careful: A Review of H. L. Goodall, Jr.'s *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*

### Abstract

In his latest book, *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*, H. L. Goodall effectively uses his unique narrative style to introduce readers to the life of writing qualitative inquiry with all of its joys and perils. He asks his readers to carefully attend to the contexts--both social and discursive--they select or in which they find themselves and to consider the consequences of these interesting juxtapositions. Goodall fills his tome with colourful, provocative stories; clear, concise guidance; and useful, methodological know-how; and entices us to enter this scholarly narrative writing world.

### Keywords

Narrative, Narrative Writing, Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research

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**“To thine own context be true, but be careful”:  
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*In his latest book, *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*, H. L. Goodall effectively uses his unique narrative style to introduce readers to the life of writing qualitative inquiry with all of its joys and perils. He asks his readers to carefully attend to the contexts--both social and discursive--they select or in which they find themselves and to consider the consequences of these interesting juxtapositions. Goodall fills his tome with colourful, provocative stories; clear, concise guidance; and useful, methodological know-how; and entices us to enter this scholarly narrative writing world. Key Words: Narrative, Narrative Writing, Qualitative Inquiry, and Qualitative Research*

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Dr. H. L. Goodall starts his wonderful new book, *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*, with a very simple, yet provocative question, “So you want to be a qualitative researcher who tells interesting stories?” and emphatically represents on each and every page just how he has delightfully mastered the art of which he writes! The art is variously called narrative nonfiction writing, narrative ethnography, autoethnography, or performative writing, among others; and the mastery is the fascinating weaving of stories and stories about stories designed to tell the tale of how to write well in this genre of qualitative research and why to remember that narratives are always told by someone to someone within a context or framework. To this end Dr. Goodall is his own best evidence that sharing stories is an effective means for us to learn a narrative way of knowing and communicating and one we should try to practice ourselves in our own working and living.

With his basic “I’ll share my stories as a way to empower you to share your stories” pattern in place, Dr. Goodall then transports us through a series of contexts in which he helps us to learn the ways of the narrative writer from inception to completion, the steps of making our narratives public, the skills of the critical narrative connoisseur, the survival skills of the heroic academic, and the opportunities the world beyond the campus presents. He also warns us of the perilous pathway narrative inquiry can be when we find ourselves in unfriendly or close-minded contexts such as was the case in the chilling story he shared of the attempted “symbolic kill” one of his colleagues narrowly avoided in a tenure and promotion plot from hell. The story is not for the faint of heart and unfortunately not all that uncommon in the halls of academe.

In sharing these tales Dr. Goodall suggests that we should select our contexts well and be wary of the subtle, and sometimes, not so subtle ways policies, people, programs, and procedures shape not only our narratives, but also our lives. Knowing this meaning in context maxim as Mishler (1979) reminded us is one way we as writers of narratives can

steer clear of potentially stormy waters and navigate ourselves into calm seas and safe harbors. This course of action is an important one because to share a narrative way of knowing with our readers is to open up a world of story that can save people from despair, can right injustices, and can bring hope to the hopeless. To this end Dr. Goodall does us a great service by showing us how we can take this pathway less traveled and he is also kind enough to share the positives and the negatives that may await us on this trek.

Dr. Goodall starts us on this journey by reciting the five R's of narrative writing: representation, reflection, (w)riting, research, and reading. For each of the R's Dr. Goodall clearly presents the concept, justifies its importance, and operationalizes the practice with many storied examples. He further helps immerse us as readers into each R by providing us with a series of activities and questions at the end of the chapter. I also found his footnotes to contain such interesting accents that I lamented how the American Psychological Association (2001) publication manual has helped to extinguish that style of narrative in much of our contemporary scholarly landscape.

From this conceptual treatment of narrative writing, Dr. Goodall takes us closer to the act itself in the second chapter by helping us learn how to enter the writing habit (Chenail, 1996; Huddle, 1991) to create captivating beginnings, middles, and ends. He starts with simple tips of overcoming the dreaded blank page, electronic or paper, and then takes us diachronically through the narrative structure as we are encouraged to examine the story creating process from the inside. Dr. Goodall accomplishes this subtextual exploration by drawing upon extensive excerpts from his and others' writings so we can see the concepts and devices in the published words themselves as the stories and the stories about the stories merge in one lucid stream of intertextual didactic and evocative discourse. It is quite the expository tour de force!

From these two foundational chapters we then explore the adventures of the life narrative as the private tales of the qualitative researcher enter the *public-ation* world of academic journals and scholarly presses. The prose of this chapter is organized around five submission questions and five commandments of the academic publication process. As a journal editor I have to admit I really liked these two sets of fives especially the importance of format. I know style guides and formatting directions can drive some authors absolutely crazy, but from an editor's perspective the simple act of authors taking the time to read the directions and caring enough to re-present their work within these frameworks suggests they consider the importance of starting out a relationship and making an effort to connect to the editorial world of the journal. These simple gestures, such as paying careful attention to culturally-framed behaviors of greeting a new visitor, can go a long way to establish a meaningful connection between author and editor that should be mutually supportive and rewarding for all parties. It certainly takes effort, but such consideration of the other in the editorial relationship is one quality we should endeavor to preserve and honor in the world of scholarly journals and presses.

From the realm of the scholarly editorial process Goodall asks us as writers to don our appreciative cap and to enter the framework of the critical reader. By appropriating a perspective normally reserved for the editor and reviewer, we as readers can develop our reflective skills which will pay great dividends when we turn this discerning eye to our own work. He asks us to take the time to appreciate beauty of the fictional and the factual expression of the human condition to develop our own sense of quality for the narratives we give and receive, and to learn the wisdom of accepting Donald Polkinghorne's

observation that "...the judgment of the relative (scholarly) truth and (literary) beauty of a narrative text lies solely with the evaluation of the reader" (Goodall, 2008, p. 136).

From this setting of aesthetics and poetics Goodall takes us to a very scary place known as academy in which the petty and the profound seem to share equal billing in treacherous medieval rituals such as the tenure review. After thoroughly frightening us with an account of one such review that almost ended tragically for a gifted and productive colleague, Goodall carefully demystifies this evaluative trial and provides sage counsel as to how to construct and frame an academic portfolio that evidences one's productivity, testifies to the quality of one's work, and appeals to those who are about to render a verdict on one's case for promotion and tenure. In doing so Goodall draws upon the utility of a narrative way of communicating and advocates a simple strategy to manage the complex and sometimes dangerous world of the academy: know thy story and thy audience or in other words "To thine own context be true, but be careful."

I think Dr. Goodall's last chapter is the most fascinating as he explores the world outside of academic and encourages us to consider becoming "public scholars" in a very real sense. To help us to cultivate a public audience by creating our "identity for public consumption" (Goodall, 2008, p. 198), he walks us through a series of contexts such as writing for a trade or crossover market, connecting with audiences and communities beyond the scholarly world of colleges and universities, and creating a web identity. As with the previous chapters Dr. Goodall weaves his colorful and tactical tales to help us appreciate the prescriptions and cautions he shares. When contemplating writing for a mass or popular audience, Dr. Goodall tells the tale of one academic's harrowing, but ultimately rewarding experience of "going public" with his research. The story helps to remind us that each publishing realm comes with its own customs and rituals as well its own perils and rewards.

The practical and tangible tips and suggestions offered in this chapter are right on target when it comes to breaking into the popular press. Dr. Goodall's nuanced word coaching when it comes to crafting query letters and proposals shows his attention to detail and his appreciation for what catches an editor's gaze and what causes an editor to hit the delete key.

He continues his insider's tale of successful publishing by reminding us to never forget our audience and we can consider a multitude of prospective readers when we consider publishing our work. As we ponder each of these reading communities we can begin to play creatively and strategically with our ideas and let the interests of our readers help us to improvise and shape the work as we make it public.

As I read these sections I was reminded of the interesting process constructing a book prospectus is. In asking us for our proposal, publishers ask us to not only describe our work and its importance, but to situate our book in a context of other works published on the topic, readers will want to read our book, teachers who will use the book to teach, journal editors who might review our finished products, and external reviewers who can expertly review our projections. It seems that we are writers, reviewers, marketers, and arbitrators all at the same time and we can only blame (or praise) ourselves if the book is not found acceptable by the publisher.

Such an interesting situation along with the access the Internet brings can lead writers to consider new business models and publishing avenues when it comes to making our ideas public. Just as the music industry is trying to figure out how to produce

their product lines in this new world of accessibility; academic writers will be faced with interesting choices for publication outlets. Do we continue to write our journal articles for no direct remuneration save for the hope that our portfolio of work will help us to be promoted within the academy, do we keep submitting our manuscripts to publishers with the hope of getting a sizable royalty, or do we consider the world of blogging, user generated social networking sites, wikipedias, and other information sources such as About.com (<http://www.about.com>) or Google's Knol project (<http://knol.google.com>) to not only create our public identity on the web or do these virtual publishing sites become our main source of distributing our research? Such a strategy might not sound all that strange or really that new considering the observations Dr. Goodall shares from Gerry Phillips, a distinguished communication researcher and scholar:

Listen before scholars turned inward and created journals as the primary vehicles for the dissemination of knowledge, before we divided up the study of communication into narrow specializations, we had to cultivate a public audience to drum up interest in our subjects and to pay our bills. (Goodall, 2008, p. 198)

As more scholars post their lectures on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/>) or actually make a living by becoming popular topic experts or guides on About.com, the more we will see the web moving from an interesting divergence or marketing tool to a serious, profitable opportunity for us academics. Of course, the more things change, the more they seem to remain the same. As Dr. Goodall suggests as narrative beings we will always benefit from creating, sharing, and embracing of story regardless the technology or the context.

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### Author Note

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